When I Struggle With Cognitive Empathy as Someone on the Autism Spectrum

Arianna Brandstetter

This is a very hard article for me to write, but I think it might help others in the same situation as me. Until my diagnosis as autistic, I was so scared I would be seen as something evil if anyone ever found out I have this “deficit”; you see, I have a problem with cognitive empathy, what is also known as theory of mind. I have a problem putting myself in other people’s “shoes.”

Let me say unilaterally and profoundly — not only to help myself, but to help those reading this with the same problem I have — having a deficit in cognitive empathy is not something you should be angry at yourself over, scared of, hate yourself for, or that makes you a bad person.

My cousin unexpectedly passed away a few weeks ago. I was not close to her, but I was very close to her older sister. Her sister came over to tell me in person and started crying, and I wrapped my arms around her. This may sound bad, but for me, due to my deficit causing more problems than normal, my brain defaulted to the social script/rule. Now let me mention, this problem happens less frequently now than in the past, because for one, I have enough experience to be able to match up automatically what others are experiencing and what I have experienced in my life, and two, I generally don’t put myself in situations where much if any cognitive empathy is required.
However, when my cousin came over, I ran into the problem again: I could not put myself in her “shoes,” and I needed to.

This is a type of empathy that some of us on the spectrum can have problems with. Many of us can empathize with your emotions; in fact, some of us can do it too well, feel your emotions too much. I have a strong empathetic reaction to people displaying a strong emotion, or characters in movies. However, the type of empathy I am talking about, cognitive empathy, where we can see something from others’ perspectives is where a few of us can have a problem. There is a difference between the two; although many people might not realize that, and this may be why some people say those on the spectrum have no empathy.

I don’t do that well at understanding nonverbal communications anyways; throw in the issue with cognitive empathy, and all I can understand is she is crying and the emotions that typically go along with it, which gives me 20 percent of the information I needed to understand what was going on. Normally, this would not have caused an issue; normally, I don’t have reasons to put myself in someone’s “shoes.” But here, I felt I must to be able to best help her. I have lost both my parents, but that is different; I have lost grandparents, but that is different. I had no scripts, social rules or experiences that would allow me to be able to see this from her perspective, which made me very distressed and confused.

In situations like this, not only is the other person having problems, but for those of us with deficits in cognitive empathy, it can also be a scary and extremely confusing situation. Oftentimes, we may know we should be able to see it from their perspective, but we can’t. I know she must have a perspective, and if I could see it I might be able to better understand what to do to help her and how to react. Instead, all I had was a confusing blank inside of her, a flashing cursor. After my cousin left, it took me a little while to stop hating myself, to stop deriding myself as a horrible person for not having a “normal” ability, to stop being angry at myself for not being able to understand her. In situations of deficits, I’ve found many people direct large amounts of self-hate at themselves where a deficit is seen as interfering, especially with something important. But I am starting to realize and accept that having problems with cognitive empathy is OK. I am not perfect; neither is anyone on this planet. If we have a problem putting ourselves in someone’s “shoes” we do, and we should not beat ourselves up over it. We all have strengths that may give us unique abilities and insights, but we also have deficits, and those deficits are not the whole of our definition. We can work to lessen their impact on our lives by developing good coping skills and accepting the deficits.

A benefit to getting older is I have built up a library of scripts. It is how I survive, pass, and function. I also have coping skills I have developed over years, like avoiding situations where something I have a deficit in is required or likely to happen. However, no matter how hard we may try, how many scripts we may have, how many rules may be in place, and how many experiences we can reference, there can still be times when we will have to say or do something despite our deficits that we are not ready for.

I was lucky; I think I did OK, just holding, listening and supporting her, basically, just being there for her.

Reprinted from: www.themighty.com
Seven Tips on Developing Small Talk for Those with Autism

The following tips and suggestions from my book *Make Social Learning Stick!* May help your child feel comfortable talking with whoever shows up at the party or dinner table:

1. **Social Spying:** When you’re out in the community, ask your child to observe other people and try to infer what the person might be interested in or how people are related or connected to one another. Learning to make guesses about others helps in finding good topics of conversation.

2. **Topics for Small Talk:** Help your child make a list of topics that most people like to talk about in shorter conversations (e.g., the weather, learning what the person is doing at school, work or in other activities, asking questions about what is going on in their life, a new pet or sport, etc.).

3. **Conversation Cards:** Create cards with open-ended questions like, “What was the best (or worst) part of your day?” or “What’s your favorite movie and why?” Place them in the middle of the dinner table and take turns picking up a card and posing a question. Practicing at home will make it easier to converse with people who are less familiar.

4. **Conversation Cards at a Holiday Meal:** People of different generations can get to know one another better as they take turns answering questions about their lives. For example, ask about a person’s favorite vacation or first pet or a favorite movie.

5. **Wonder Questions:** “Wh” questions (who, what, why, etc.) are good conversation starters. Make a visual cue or prompt to remind your child of these words and practice using them at home during family meals. Feel free to copy and use the visual from my book *Make Social Learning Stick!*

6. **Neighborhood Chats:** Walk around the neighborhood with your child and greet people you know. As you converse with neighbors, try to include your child in the discussion. Prepare for the walks by coming up with questions to ask neighbors like, “How are you today?” or “Did you enjoy your weekend?”

7. **Car Talk:** Some kids prefer to talk in the car, where they don’t have to worry about direct eye contact or body language. Use car trips to practice making conversation. As the holidays approach, it’s a perfect time to work on conversational skills. Social gatherings, at this time of year, are usually times when loved ones gather and can support and reinforce practicing these skills with a range of different people in a fun and safe environment. Learning to think about others, read the social situation, and become socially adept is a valuable skill not only at family gatherings, but also at school, work, and almost everywhere else.

*Reprinted from:* www.autismawarenesscentre.com
This blog really stands out for being both informative and being openly unapologetic about being on the Spectrum. A young man named, James Sinclair, who lives in the UK and decided to compile a blog of fascinating news stories and articles about the more positive side of autism.

The blog is divided into several sections: Home Page, with the most current stories, Understanding Autism, Embracing Autism, Autism in Entertainment and Autism News. Each section has a set of interesting articles including an interview with a policeman with ASD, articles about the purpose of echolalia, the prevalence of ASD and Interception, the awareness of one’s internal state. Examples of this is the feeling of having to go to the bathroom, feeling like a flu bug is coming on or suddenly feeling chilly in the office and needing one’s sweater. The author goes into a detailed explanation of this overlooked but important sense. Each article questions established assumptions with the hope that minds will be opened allowing newer ideas and viewpoints to come in. I was fascinated by the range and depth of the articles and the invitation at the end of each piece to “Join in the Discussion” and add one’s own viewpoint on the topic. While the author gives his own take on that subject, I was impressed with how he welcomes input from readers and how his writing invites deeper thought and questioning of the established norms around autism.

By far my favorite part of this site is the section devoted to news items and they are arranged chronologically by month, starting with December 2018 and ending with September of this year. Each month’s entry starts with small Honorable Mention pieces that are little news tidbits, then the major stories of the month and topics ranging from the latest brain research on autism to new treatment approaches to events in the author’s area of the world. One can click on the Older Posts on any section of the blog to find archived entries and each post is dated so one knows exactly when it was released. The organization of the blog plus the author’s warmth and sense of humor along with the fascinating range of topics makes for a real winner. Don’t miss this one! Just keep in mind that this is based in the UK and is in collaboration with Britain’s National Autistic Society. Also, the author uses the term “Autist,” which may be off-putting to some. These caveats aside, this blog is informative and has great photos!
This new book is a continuation of the book *M is for Autism* about the girls at the Limpsfield Grange School which is a school for girls with ASD and similar conditions in the United Kingdom. They receive the help and supports that they might not otherwise get in the regular schools. *M in the Middle* goes even further into the life of one student; M is now a teenager and must grapple with hormone changes, her interest in boys and ANXIETY.

The book begins with M’s newly minted autism diagnosis that the school seems unwilling to acknowledge. M describes her many anxiety triggers such as walking down labyrinth of hallways, the flickering fluorescent lights, the noise of clanging lockers and so much more! The author dramatizes all this by making the letters of some words BIGGER to reflect the level of anxiety and panic.

M then experiences even more problems when she becomes “friends” with Shaznia. M doesn’t pick up the subtle cues that indicate that this girl is not really a friend but someone who is trying to take advantage of her. She continues to hang out with Shaznia despite all of the problems. Her difficulties are compounded by her visits to the “Oval,” an apartment where her father and his girlfriend live since her mother decided to separate from her father. The transition between her mother’s house and the Oval causes even more anxiety just as switching between my mother’s house and my father and stepmother’s house on the weekends as a teenager caused me. One can just feel the tension between M’s mother and her father, a struggling musician, who has not had much career success and who spends a lot of time on the couch at home before he moved out to live with another woman.

In addition, M’s classmate, Joe who is a real gem, tries to help and befriend her but she’s obsessed with a boy called “Lynx”. She keeps hundreds of photos of him in computer files that she looks at during school hours. This results in some serious trouble and the reader is taken on a journey of adolescent angst that is magnified many times by autism. The school’s lack of understanding of autism spectrum disorders and the unwillingness to accommodate and support her in any way is a reflection of what is seen every day in classrooms everywhere from Austin to Gainesville to Berlin.

This book really hit close to home for me; the sheer and palpable hostility radiating from Mr. Crane, the headmaster, to the conflict between being loyal to Mum or Dad, to the anxiety surrounding dating and relationships. Though this is fiction, it reflects real life for teens with ASD to a T. Especially for girls on the autism spectrum, who are still so misunderstood.
## Random Acts of Kindness Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: __________________</th>
<th>Teacher: __________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Directions:** After you complete one “Random Act of Kindness” activity, check off or color in the appropriate box. Challenge yourself and see if you can get all 16 done in one week!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Write a positive note to a classmate</th>
<th>Let someone go before you in line</th>
<th>Push in someone’s chair</th>
<th>Hold a door open for someone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play with someone new during recess</td>
<td>Give a silent wave</td>
<td>Say “hi” to someone new</td>
<td>Thank an adult in the school for something they do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharpen someone’s pencils</td>
<td>Make a card for your favorite teacher</td>
<td>Give a compliment to someone</td>
<td>Help someone who has dropped something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help someone before they ask</td>
<td>Give a nice compliment</td>
<td>Clean up after yourself</td>
<td>Clean up after someone else</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is seriously the EASIEST recipe ever!

Just some baking soda and conditioner and BOOM!
Special Thanks To:

**In Honor of the Bianchi Family:**
Maureen Wroble

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YourCause

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Stephen Gulyas
Michael Holbrook
Connor, Greg & Lisa Rentschler
Todd & Tammy Ryan
Marion Smith
Barbara Yakes

**New Members:**
Dan, Tracie & Alex Csomos
Jill Gerrie

**Stephen Tsai Fund:**
Luke, Merling & Stephen Tsai

Warm Winter Wishes!!